

Our Native White-Tailed Deer Are Resourceful.

For the past several years, we have been growing a few non-native cacti in cactus beds inside our fence. A number of them are commonly called spineless or blind prickly pear. Surprisingly, this year, just after the first hard freeze we had, I noticed that a number of the branches on some of them had broken off at the attachment points. So after a few days when it had warmed up, I went out and loaded up the broken-off pieces into a large garden cart and hauled them off to a couple of places in the pasture 50 yards or so from our house.

Then yesterday I could see from my window a deer in the vicinity of one of the piles and it was soon joined by a couple of other deer. So this morning I went out and found that the majority of both piles of spineless prickly pear were gone. The few pieces that were left showed obvious signs of being browsed by the deer.

Prickly pear pads are really stems that carry out the same functions as the leaves of other plants. The pads are flexible enough to allow for expansion and contraction and they hold water very efficiently in dry times. There are internal fibrous structures that help hold the pads shape.

The spines of the prickly pear are really modified leaves (thorns are modified stems, and prickles are modified epidermis). The obvious function of spines is to prevent animals from eating them. But some prickly pear are spineless. As best I can tell, there is only one spineless native to Texas, and it (blind prickly pear) grows only in far west Texas. So our spineless, non-native cacti apparently grew up in a warmer climate and is not well adapted to below 20-degree weather.

And so our native Hill Country deer took advantage of a plant they discovered in the pasture that they had never seen before. It is not that easy for them to eat, as the fibrous mat-like material inside the pads is tough, but they can obviously strip off the softer tissue. And when one deer was working on the pear and other deer saw that it had found something to eat they obviously joined in the fun. Interestingly, one batch of cactus pads I hauled to the pasture was from a cow-tongue cactus with spines—it was untouched.

Many animals take advantage of observing other members of their species having found food and rush to join them. We probably see that behavior more often in nature films with carnivores on a kill, but herbivores do it as do birds as well.

Interestingly, I have observed cattle eating regular prickly pear WITH spines around where I live. It kind of makes you cringe to watch them bite off a piece of pear, chew it and swallow it. They tend to stretch out their necks when they do that as if to minimize the pain. And again, when one cow begins to eat a prickly pear, it is not uncommon for others to come up and join her. It may be that cattle really like the smell of broken or damaged prickly pear.

It is well known to ranchers that if the spines are burned off prickly pear, especially during a drought when the cattle are hungry, cattle will flock to eat the “de-armed” pear. Many folks who conduct prescribed burns will let the cattle into a recently burned area for a brief time as a way to control the population of prickly pear. They obviously like it. Whether it is good for them or not is debated.

I have frequently observed another instance of our local deer being resourceful. We have an aerobic septic system that sprays treated water out into the pasture every few days, and as such it keeps a small area relatively moist. Especially in the winter, this results in there being green, cool-season grasses growing in the area. Deer don't usually eat much grass because their digestive system can't digest much. But these tender green shoots are easier to digest than most grass and they frequent the area regularly, especially in winter, and the grass never gets more than about an inch tall.

Until next time...

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